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THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF RESURRECTION.

J AMES S. RIGGS, D.D., and Professor at the Auburn Theological Seminary, expresses in a recent number of the *Biblical World* his conviction that the Easter message of the resurrection of Christ is an indispensable part of Christianity which should not be surrendered to the demands made by the *Zeitgeist*. A distinction has been made between the Easter message (viz., a belief in the bodily resurrection of the Christ) and the Easter faith (viz., a belief in the immortality of the soul) and the *Zeitgeist* urges us "to accept the latter, but to reject the former as impossible in view of modern enlightenment. In other words, an actual resurrection as the church has commonly understood it did not take place, and yet Jesus lives."

It is true, as Professor Riggs states, that "the immortality of the soul is not a scriptural expression," it is a modern invention. The Gospels believe in "a resurrection of man, body and soul." Redemption includes the whole man. To strike out therefore that side of the truth which shows that the body as well as the spirit is to enter into the true conception of complete immortality, is to miss the real climax of all the teachings of the Scriptures regarding the future of man. Jesus "brought to light this wondrous completeness by coming himself from the grave. . . . the fact of the resurrection, therefore, is of the most importance." *

It is quite true that according to the early Christians "the Easter message belongs with the Easter faith." The question is only whether we can still believe it. Professor Riggs sees no diffi-

* See Acts xvii. 32; 1 Corinthians xv. 3, 14, 20.

culty; he claims that the "vision theory runs up against stubborn, inexplicable obstacles." Considering all the evidence he says "the empty grave is most satisfactorily explained by the actual resurrection of Jesus," and he argues that it is better to let "the faith of the disciples rest upon the fact of the resurrection than upon God-inspired visions given to create belief in a fact which after all was not a fact." In the opinion of Professor Riggs, "the surety of the fact" is sufficiently vouched for by historical evidence and the value that it possesses for us cannot be underrated by any Christian believer.

No doubt Professor Riggs voices the opinion of the orthodox traditional conception of Christianity, which believes not so much in the immortality of the soul as in the resurrection of the flesh, but a new interpretation of the Christian faith is preparing itself in the minds of the people, and we regard it as most significant that a representative of the more liberal view rises in the person of the scholarly Canon of Westminster, one of the most distinguished clergymen of the Church of England.

Canon Hensley Henson's article on "The Resurrection of Jesus Christ" has created a stir in the religious world because the Canon openly expresses his conviction that a belief in the bodily resurrection of Christ is not essential to true Christianity. He knows very well and grants that in the days of early Christianity the belief in bodily resurrection was regarded as the most important part of the faith. Further, Paul says: "If Christ has not been raised then is our preaching vain, your faith is also vain." But the belief in a bodily resurrection is only evidence of the materialism of the early Christians who could not conceive the truth of immortality otherwise than in the form of a resurrection of the dead body. The Canon is fully informed of the arguments which theological scholars adduce in favor of the resurrection of the body of Christ, but he has also carefully investigated the reports of Biblical criticism, and he comes to the conclusion that it cannot be set aside lightly or easily. He says:*

"The candid Christian, we say, when reading these statements

* *The Hibbert Journal* for April, 1904, pp. 476-493.

cannot escape the inference that the evidence for the quasi-historical statements of the Creed is of a highly complicated, dubious, and even contradictory character."

He further says of historical criticism, the youngest of the sciences, that "it cannot claim even such a measure of recognition as that which the older sciences have succeeded in wresting from the Christian Church; but the analogy between the course of events by which the conclusion of astronomy, geology, and biology have, one after the other, been, so to say, domesticated within the theological sphere, and the course of events by which the conclusions of historical criticism must undergo the same process, is, at every point, complete."

St. Paul himself, though he insists on the fact that Christ has been "raised from the dead," repudiates at the same time a materialistic conception of the resurrection, and Canon Henson adds:

"The dissolution of the physical body in the grave will not, we are assured, hinder the process of resurrection in the case of Christ's disciples."

Therefore the Canon concludes that a physical resurrection cannot be an essential part of the Christian faith. "The emptiness of the sepulchre might conceivably be as little worthy of credence as the materialistic details in St. Matthew xviii. 9 and St. Luke xxiv. 36 ff.*" Quoting Bishop Westcott, the Canon proposes to replace the words "the Lord was raised" in the apostolic conception of the resurrection by the words "the Lord lives," and the real proof of the resurrection should be found in the fact that Christ lives and works still.

Canon Henson's article is a remarkable evidence that the world moves. If he, the Canon of Westminster, can, without being excommunicated, make this statement which we ourselves proposed a few years ago as the only possible solution of the essential doctrine of Christianity, we see the time near at hand when the philosophy of *The Open Court* will be regarded as good Christian doctrine, orthodox not from the standpoint of the traditional conception of dogma-

* Cf. Acts x. 41.

tism, but in the sense of being a doctrine that is tenable before the tribunal of science which is true orthodoxy, for it is rightness of doctrine; it is doctrine that is universally acceptable, and therefore genuinely catholic.

There are heroes in battle and there are also heroes in the domain of thought, and we do not underrate the courage of Canon Henson to scorn all equivocation and make his statement boldly and plainly, risking the enmity of the narrow-minded whose number is legion and the alienation of many of his friends and co-religionists.

The belief in immortality is the crucial point of Christianity. Formulated as the doctrine of resurrection it embodies it in a quasi-allegorical form, but we ought to bear in mind that the Gospel stories of Christ's rising from the dead and his ascent into heaven are later additions which were not part of the original Gospel, and we ought to understand that they are true in an allegorical sense. They reflect the truth of immortality. It may not be out of place to reprint here the passage of a former article of ours which was the subject of Canon Henson's discussion:

"Considering the sanctity that was attributed to Sunday among the Gentiles, especially the disciples and similar sects, it was natural that Easter Day, the festival of Resurrection, should have been celebrated on the first Sunday after the Passover.

"The burden of the Christian Gospel as preached by St. Paul is the message of the resurrection of Christ, in which the apostles implicitly believed. Whatever we may think of the accounts of it in the New Testament we must grant that the doctrine of immortality is the quintessence of the Christian religion, which was the cause of its final triumph. The oldest account in the Gospel according to Mark makes the simple statement that the grave was found empty, and this suggested at once to his followers the idea that Jesus must have risen from the dead. The immediate result was visions of the departed master. He was seen by Mary Magdalene, by St. Peter, by the eleven apostles, then by more than three hundred brethren, and finally by St. Paul.

"One of these visions (that of St. Paul) lies within the pale of historical investigation, and, in spite of the contradictions discov-

ered in the several versions of the event, offers nothing that seems improbable or inexplicable.

"The history of the Gospel stories of the resurrection has been traced by the higher critics, and we may briefly state that later reports, superadded to the original account in Mark of the empty grave, show the spirit in which the early Christians regarded the idea of Christ's resurrection. Paul's Christ is a spiritual presence, while the Christ of a later writer, hankering after a corporeal immortality, is a bodily presence who makes doubters touch him and parades his corporeality by eating in the presence of witnesses. Finally he is reported to have departed from the earth by ascending to heaven.

"Perhaps the most beautiful conception of the risen Christ (incomparably nobler than the crude materialistic notion of a corporeal resurrection) is reflected in the tale of the disciples of Emmaus, where Christ, the departed master, speaks out of the mouth of a stranger whom they meet on the way and with whom they break bread together. They knew him not until he was gone. And how did they know him? His words were the words of Jesus, and the way in which he broke bread and spoke the blessing reminded them of their beloved master. Who will deny that in this sense Christ has proved a living presence ever since and is still so even unto the generations of these latter days?"

EDITOR.